

Aim of lesson

To learn from the way Jonah tried to run from God, and how God rescued him from the result of his actions.

Bible background

Jonah 1; 2 and 3:1-3.

Outline of lesson

You may like to look at the two chapters of Jonah in their entirety and then consider the lessons for us, or you could look at the lesson from each point as you proceed. This outline will do the latter. When you begin to look at the lessons for us, you may find the workbook useful as an outline of the main points.

God speaks to Jonah

Read with the class Jonah 1:1 -3. God spoke clearly to Jonah and told him what to do. Jonah obviously did not want to do it. He ran away. Why he was so reluctant to go is not stated. It may have been because he was afraid of what the Assyrian people would do to him when he gave them a message of the destruction that was coming on their capital. It may have been because he did not want the people of Nineveh to have an opportunity to repent. Jonah 4:1-2 suggests that is certainly in his mind.

The students may be able to appreciate how Jonah might have felt if they consider what an Israeli of today, being sent with a similar message to a fanatical Moslem country, might feel.

Does God speak to us?

In the workbook there is a space for the students to write their thoughts on this question. It is important for them to see that God speaks to us all through his word, the Bible. What God has to say there is not just for other people in another time; it is also for us today. As Paul says to the people at Athens 'God commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30).

Running from God

Jonah's reaction to God's command is to run away. This seems to us a senseless thing to do. Jonah knew that God had made 'The sea and the land' (Jonah 1:9), so he should have known that going to sea would not take him away from God. However, in spite of the fact that we too know that it is both foolish and impossible, we can try to run away from God like Jonah. Ask the class to discuss the way in which we can ignore what God tells us to do and go off to do what we think would be better. The ideas can be summarised in the space in the workbook.

The storm

Read with the class the rest of Jonah 1. God brought the storm to halt Jonah in his tracks. Often running from God can take us into trouble too. This could be God's way of making us think and turn back to him, but it could also be trouble of our making, since running from God's teaching will often take us toward things which are evil and harmful.

The storm seems to make Jonah see things more clearly. He tells the crew what he has done and who God is. Perhaps this is a confession of his sin; he says in verse 12: 'I know it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you'. It is Jonah who tells the sailors to throw him overboard. Is he accepting that he deserves to die? Can the class think of situations where we might think more clearly because of a situation of trouble? Certainly when there is war or tragedy people forget to worry about trivialities. The things that matter become clearer.

The class could write their ideas on the next two parts of the workbook.

Jonah's two prayers

Read with the class Jonah 2. This is the prayer that Jonah says inside the fish. The prayer makes reference to another prayer that Jonah had said while still in the water, when he thought he was about to drown. 'The prayer of chapter 2 is, in fact, a prayer of thanksgiving, thanking God for having answered his prayer for rescue from drowning.

When things were at their worst Jonah prayed. Ask the class, if they think it is true that many people remember to pray when trouble is all around. Can they think of any examples?

A frightened rescue

Being swallowed by a large fish, probably a whale, might not seem like being saved. Yet Jonah prays with great confidence from inside the fish. Perhaps God's way of saving us by faith, obedience and baptism may not seem like a reasonable way to be saved from death, but we need to learn, as Jonah had to learn, that God's way is always best.

The last question in the workbook is to encourage the class to think about what Jonah had learned of the character of God from all that had happened to him so far. He had learned that God brings judgment on a wicked city, that he can see us everywhere, that he has control over weather and over fish, that he listens and that he can rescue from death.

Digging deeper

Jonah and Jesus

This section considers what Jesus said about Jonah and suggests that the students think about Jonah as a type of Christ. They both cried to God, they both saved the people, they both spent three days and three nights dead (or as good as).

Relevance to our lives

The class could ask as many people as possible during the week if they think people turn to God and pray more when things go well or when there are problems or disasters. Remember to discuss the results of their investigations next week.

Prayer

'Lord, help us not to run away from you, but to turn to you in trouble.'

The class could look at the prayer of Jonah in chapter 2 in more detail or they could consider what the sailors might have prayed after the sea grew calm.

Other suggestions for activities

- The conversation on board the ship could be dramatised and put on tape with appropriate background noises.
- The class could write what they think the sailors would have said to their families when they got home.
- The class might like to learn Psalm 139:7-12. They could recite it to the rest of the Sunday School, perhaps reading one or two verses each.